

The Nightmare of History.
Cabrera Infante's
Vista del amanecer en el trópico
As Late Modernist Historical Fiction

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In comparison to *Tres tristes tigres* or *La Habana para un infante difunto* far less attention has been devoted to the research of Cabrera Infante's *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* (1974), a fact which can be appreciated if the relative stylistic simplicity of this book is contrasted with the complexity of *Tres tristes tigres*. The narrative works of Cabrera Infante display a curious stylistic dichotomy; those which explicitly deal with the history and politics of Cuba - *Así en la paz como en la guerra* and *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* - are written in an extremely terse style and, at first glance, incline more towards documentary writings, whereas the apparently apolitical works *Tres tristes tigres* and *La Habana para un infante difunto* are dominated by linguistically whimsical ideas and a more extensive, love-of-detail narrative. The linguistic fancies of *Tres tristes tigres* have, of course, received a great deal of attention in literary criticism, not least because these have secured Cabrera Infante a place among the authors of the so-called 'boom' in Latin American literature. Essays on *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* examine the form of the vignette, a term which Cabrera Infante himself chose for the short, descriptive fragments (Alvarez-Borland 1982: 33-44); they refer to the cyclic character of the underlying concept of history (Gil López 1989: 365-371) and, with reference to Foster (1979), to the ambivalent quality of irony and empathy which pervades the seemingly objective descriptive style of the vignettes (Fox 1986: 147-156). The most extensive essay, Dinorah Hernández Lima's *Versiones y re-versiones históricas en la obra de Cabrera Infante* (1990) interprets - as does Fox, but more briefly - the allusions to Cuban history and analyzes the descriptive technique specific to Cabrera Infante as a return to the 'ekphratic' tradition.¹ In the following discussion I intend to examine more closely the style of this work and illustrate from a more contemporary standpoint the connection between historical interpretation and narrative style.

¹*Ekphrasis* is defined as the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art, see Hernández Lima 1990: 145-153.

The setting of the historical references

From a thematic point of view Cabrera Infante's account of Cuban history is reminiscent of Stephen Daedalus' words: "History (...) is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake".² The title of Cabrera Infante's book at first evokes the stereotyped image of the tropics, reminiscent of clichéd picture postcards. In the course of the text, however, the reader learns that daybreak is the hour of execution, of dying in the gutter, of a public firing-squad. The greenness of the tropics appears as "herida verde", a "green wound" (p. 11). Cabrera Infante portrays history as a ritual of death, monotonously, obsessively repeating itself, a nightmare composed of numerous scenes depicting violent death. The main theme of this version of Cuban history, outlined in 101 fragments over 233 pages, is the moment of death of historically known or anonymous actors. The second fragment deals with the subject of the perpetual repetition of oppression. It recalls the oppression of the Siboneye and Taino Indians by the Caribs before the arrival of the Spaniards. Cabrera Infante sees no indication, therefore, of a happy prehistoric situation, even at the beginning, that is before the Conquista's 'sin'. At the same time this fragment shows that, in the compilation of the historical material, certain details are treated ironically, e.g. when quoting the Conquistadors' concern that the Indios could suffer injury from their frequent personal grooming - an opinion which, in view of the subsequent genocide, for which Cabrera Infante provides substantiating figures, has a particularly grotesque impact.³ The historic deed of the conquest is reduced here to a brief account mainly concerned with the transmittal of diseases. The next fragment is a description in the present tense of an old engraving which depicts an Indio chief (Hatuey) being burnt at the stake. The condensed portrayal of the historic conquest of Cuba is followed, therefore, by a close-up of a singular historical event. The form of the narrative medium - the description of the old engraving as a source of historical recollection - is of particular importance and is used subsequently on several occasions. The following fragment, the shortest of all, consisting of a single question, illustrates

²James Joyce, *Ulysses*, New York 1961, p. 34. I do not wish to claim a direct link between *Ulysses* and *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*, as the two books are written in completely different styles. An approximation to Joyce's style can more easily be perceived in *Tres tristes tigres*.

³Fox (1986: 148) points out that ironical treatment is used to effect particularly in the first 39 vignettes, in which Cabrera Infante has used generally well-known, stereotyped historical material which is also to be found in textbooks. Suzanne Jill Levine (1987: 548-553), who has translated *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* into English, quotes from a letter in which Cabrera Infante cites Portuondo's *History of Cuba* as the main source for the vignettes dealing with the colonial era in Cuba.

the brevity of form: "¿En qué otro país del mundo hay una provincia llamada Matanzas?" (p. 19). Although the book has no macrostructure whatsoever, a chronological sequence can be recognized from the historical allusions. The scenes span a period which extends from the arrival of the Siboney Indians on the island, the Spanish conquest and the independence movement, to the Cuban revolution and the suppression of the anti-Castro opposition; the 99th fragment contains the date 1972.⁴

Documentary or late-modernist literature?

The fragmentary form of the narrative and the complete lack of a narrative macrostructure (in terms of both story and plot) prompted me to describe the book as late-modernist historical fiction. I am referring here not to the conventions of Hispanic literary history, but taking more of a comparative approach. To be more exact, I am taking the line of Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, which appeared in 1988. Postmodernism, however vague the term may be, is, for the moment, the last global, internationally discussed concept. Linda Hutcheon's approach seems interesting, in particular with regard to the question as to what extent postmodern authors are returning to historical topics. Summarized in a simplified way the postmodern historical novel would be characterized on the one hand by a reversion to narrative macrostructures, going as far as an ironic reflection of the historical novel. On the other hand, however, it would continue to be linked with modernism by the scepticism which classical modernism expressed towards the possibility of a 'faithful' representation and towards the large-scale 19th-century teleological concepts of history. Hutcheon described late-modernist contemporary authors as those still strongly committed to the avant-garde aesthetics of fragmentation and the autonomy of art: she quotes here the French *nouveau roman* and the American surfiction (i.e. Raymond Federman).⁵ It would appear, as a whole, relatively difficult to draw a clear dividing line between late-modernist and postmodernist fiction. It could be asserted that Cabrera Infante's book has little to do with the contemporary aesthetic debate since it gives the impression of being documentary literature. It is true that the book contains much verifiable historical material, as can be determined, for example, by a comparison with Hugh Thomas' *Cuba or the pursuit of freedom* (1971). At a reading in Saarbrücken in January 1993 Cabrera Infante explained that the historical material used, which

⁴For further details concerning the historical allusions cf. Fox (1986: 155-156) and Hernández Lima (1990).

⁵Cf. Hutcheon (1988: 52).

extends from pictorial objects (old engravings, photographs), historical texts and anecdotes from newspapers, to word-of-mouth accounts, was authentic. At first glance it would appear as though the material were being conveyed in its natural state, in an untreated form. Striking, however, is the extreme lack of narration in comparison to *Tres tristes tigres* and *La Habana para un infante difunto*. It is not only the complete absence of a plot but the matter-of-fact tone within the fragments, the economy of rhetorical means, the 'objectivity': the stories seem to tell themselves. Since Flaubert's request for "impassibilité", which is displayed here in the extreme, it is also known that the alleged objectivity of narration in literature is a highly artificial process which follows certain aesthetic and ideological intentions. In *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* particular structural and narrative patterns, which clearly underline the divergence of the text in comparison to the narrative of a historian, are also to be found. The first is the anonymous quality of the figures. Whereas any historical representation is interested, for documentary reasons, in identifying historic persons, Cabrera Infante obscures the identity of all the actors. The second lies in the avoidance of any placement of time. The process of identifying with particular historical events, therefore, as opposed to the authentication strategies of the traditional historical novel, is hindered to the extent that it is entirely dependent on the historical knowledge of the reader. The sequence of fixed moments in time is disconnected from any kind of overlying historical structure. In this way the anonymous quality of the figures draws attention to the violence of history. This incorporates for the reader the picture of a never-ending recurrence in history. The combination of the literary representation of the moment with the search for the archetypical, however, is a characteristic of modern aesthetics. It attacks the teleological idea of history, typical for the 19th-century, from two extreme points; from the unit of time, the moment, and from an ahistorical concept of duration. Hayden White examined the connection between the teleological philosophy of history and the narrative plot in his well-known study *Metahistory* and in *The Content of the Form*. Unfortunately the results to which he came cannot be directly applied to Cabrera Infante. In the debate on the connection between historiographical and literary portrayals of history the basis taken, as a rule, is a model of the narrative, which is oriented to the 19th century realistic novel, i.e. to the linear narrative and plot structures, and not applicable for books such as *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*. For contemporary authors the correlation of narrative form and historical concept respectively must be analyzed for each one separately, whereby a number of important studies, such as those published by Ainsa, Balderston, Chang-Rodríguez/G. de Beer and Seymour Menton,

are already available for the Hispano-American novel.⁶ Cabrera Infante's examination of history is at a level which lies far ahead of the global concept of history. He reduces it to the existential core of confrontation with violent death, whereby, at the same time, any preceding interpretative concept of history - history as progress or as a decadence movement - is avoided. At times it is clear that he is concerned with treating historical hero-worshipping with irony. In the fragment on the death of José Martí (p. 73) he states that the dead person was very small and that only after being declared a martyr did he grow bigger and bigger and transform himself into an enormous burden for revolutionary consciousness. While this is a satirical allusion to the Martí-worship of the Castro regime, at other times the rhetoric, which is linked with historic events, is ironically emphasized: in the description of the proclamation of the independence of Cuba it is said: "es no sólo un día radiante sino promisorio - pero esto no se ve en la fotografía" (p. 91). Seen as a whole, the narrative situation appears to imitate the perception of a historian who is sitting in front of and describing a number of material sources - a historian who is either innocent, i.e. who has not yet developed a hypothesis, or who is resigned and, after all interpretative drafts have proved empty, sees only death at work in history. The narrator, as a sceptic compiler of various sources, modifies his own narrative again and again, in that he points out the uncertainty of the truth of the stories narrated and formulates hypotheses of probability. From both the subject of the omnipresent, senseless and often absurd presence of violent death in Cuban history, and from the matter-of-fact stylistic form, the book can be regarded as an attempt to commit to paper the repression of death in historiography and ideology. In respect of Cabrera Infante's anti-Castro stance, it is natural to suspect that this is a literary criticism of Marxist progressive thinking. This is backed up by the fact that Cabrera Infante describes the treatment of the adversaries, frequently former revolutionaries, as the last stage, for the moment, in Cuban history: fragment 100 is written as a transcription of an accusatory speech, in which the mother of Pedro Luis Boitel, a former revolutionary and subsequent prisoner of the Castro regime, reports that the body of her son was not surrendered to her.⁷ This direct historical reference should not be given too much emphasis, however, as it constitutes an exception. In all other cases Cabrera Infante

⁶In my study *Die Fiktion der Geschichte. Zur Konstruktion und Kritik des Historischen in zeitgenössischen italienischen und hispanoamerikanischen Romanen* (lectureship thesis, Saarbrücken 1994) I have endeavoured to compare some examples of Latin American fiction with Italian and French examples, in order to obtain a more extensive comparative view.

⁷Cabrera Infante's position as a severe critic of Castro's politics is well-known; compare his collection of political statements and essays *Mea Cuba* (1992).

preserves the anonymity of the historical figures and omits any indication of time, thus underlining the difference between *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* and documentary literature. With the reduction of history to a series of isolated moments, the text tends more towards late-modernist literature rather than the postmodern novel which, as the novels of John Fowles for example, plays with the conventions of the historical novel. I intend to illustrate this later by examining the technique which Cabrera Infante defines as "congelar momentos históricos".

History and aesthetics: the technique of 'freezing' historic moments

In his own statements Cabrera Infante emphasized the aesthetic side of the text rather than the political. Dinorah Hernández Lima quotes the following statement from a seminar which Cabrera Infante gave at the University of Virginia:

"Mi intención al escribir *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* no ha sido política, ni localista, ni histórica, sino estética: sólo he querido reducir la historia a ficción y congelar momentos históricos" (quotation from Hernández Lima 1990: 144).

His aim, therefore, was to transform history into fiction and freeze historic moments. Hernández Lima aptly interpreted the technique of 'freezing' historic moments from the point of view of the spatialization of history. Within this she also includes the many descriptions of visual documentation, i.e. of old engravings and photographs. She analyzes this descriptive technique as a revival of the rhetorical pattern of 'ekphrasis' from the antiquity. Although I do not wish to contradict this, I prefer to take a frame of reference which is nearer to our time. Cabrera Infante's technique of describing old engravings and photographs in minute detail, and his fixed moments of wilful executions indeed produce the effect of frozen pictures. The choice of the present tense to describe these engravings and photographs seems to me to be of less importance here than the complete subordination of action to the description. As far as I know no critical work about *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* has as yet pointed out that the visually-oriented descriptive technique is typical of the *nouveau roman*.⁸ In the *nouveau roman* the intention of describing time as a sequence of isolated moments rather than as a continuum is also clear -

⁸Critics have up to now referred in particular to the connection of *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* to Hemingway's *The Green Hills of Africa*, compare the textual references for the first vignette of the work in Levine (1987). Levine, however, also makes clear that Cabrera Infante dates the influence of Hemingway to the earliest vignettes written in 1963 and disassociates himself from this.

think of the programmatic title of Robbe-Grillet's *Instantanés*, i.e. fixed moments in time. Claude Simon extended this descriptive technique to the portrayal of historic situations. As Robbe-Grillet explained in *Le miroir qui revient* (1984: 10-27, 208-211), this descriptive technique is not simply an experiment relating to aesthetic form, but a form of representation which is appropriate to the obsessive character of the moment portrayed. The supposed coldness of a precise, visually-oriented description makes the scenes described freeze in the reader's perception and probably finds, therefore, a better means of perceiving and remembering traumatic experiences than a portrayal which endeavours to evoke the full emotional participation of the reader. As is known from psychoanalysis, the psyche tries to resist traumatic events by making them non-reality;⁹ the isolated, frozen pictures are thus explained in connection with traumatization. The extreme reduction of the narrative means and of any kind of usual macrostructure could, in this case, be interpreted as a creative technique, with which the obsessive quality of a historical vision can be conveyed, which sees every historical act *sub specie mortis*. Of interest in this respect is a statement of Cabrera Infante quoted by Levine in which he views the originality of his work to be the framing of historic moments in the description of photographs and other visual material ("the originality of paralyzing history in photographs, graphic referents" quotation from Levine 1987: 551). The wording of this also demonstrates the active resistance of the author: history which brings death is, for its part, paralyzed in the writing process. Indications of this technique are shown in identically worded openings "En el grabado se ve ..." (Vignettes 3, 7, 11, 23) or phrases such as that which follows the description of three dead men: "No se mueven porque es una fotografía y porque hace horas que est n muertos y los dejaron allí para escarmiento y miedo" (p. 173). The correspondence incorporated in the phrasal structure between the immobility of the medium, the photograph, and that of death has here the effect of a metanarrative reference to the role of the vignettes, in which descriptions of visual memories (engravings, photographs) merge into descriptions of historic events or scenes. Despite many stylistic differences a proximity can be found here to the technique of Claude Simon, who frequently allows, as in *Les Géorgiques*, historical events to slowly emerge from the description of documents, pictures, engravings, photographs and sculptures. Cabrera Infante can claim a certain legitimation for his idea, as it is concerned with a source-evidenced interpretation of Cuban history. Whether it is informative for historians is another matter. From a literary point of view, however, it can in my opinion be maintained that

⁹Compare, for example, S. Freud, *Der Realitätsverlust bei Neurose und Psychose* (1924).

Cabrera Infante has found a valid aesthetic form for the nightmare vision of history. The writings in *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* might give the impression that the confrontation with history has almost deprived Cabrera Infante of his literary language. A greater stylistic contrast can hardly be imagined as that between *Tres tristes tigres*, with its baroque linguistic games, and *Vista del amanecer en el trópico* with its extreme reduction of the narrative.¹⁰ In *La Habana para un infante difunto* Cabrera Infante even returns to the use of traditional macrostructures in the fictional autobiography. Here also a parallel to the revival of the autobiography in the *nouveau roman* in the 1980's, as in Robbe-Grillet's *Le miroir qui revient*, can be seen. *La Habana para un infante difunto* is an attempt at historical reconstruction sui generis. The nostalgic and humorous work of recollection endeavours here to evoke by literary means the Havana of the author's youth which, due to exile, is severed from any direct means of perception. This fictional autobiography seems to me to be a counterpoise to *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*. Whereas in that book the vision of death in history goes hand in hand with a condensed narrative, here the recollection of the erotic experiences of youth is accompanied by a sometimes excessively garrulous narrative exuberance. It is noticeable, however, that the new-found joy in narration is only realized in an area which lies beyond the great historical discourse and provides a contrasting world to this. For Cabrera Infante the subject of history is, apparently, incompatible with his well-known linguistic creativity. When reading *Vista del amanecer en el trópico*, we are still far removed from the games which postmodern novels play with historical references and with the conventions of historical representation. On the other hand, how can history be a joking matter for an author who, for more than 25 years, has been living in exile?

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¹⁰I do not wish to take up the matter of whether *Tres tristes tigres* or *La Habana para un infante difunto*, are apolitical novels. For Siemens (1989), *Tres tristes tigres* is, at a deeper level, a political text that, following Derrida's concept of 'différance', resists the monological character of ideology by creating a multi-vocal text.

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